

Bulldogs Bleed Black and Gold

John Lavelle

I was an assistant coach at Rock Island High School and was happy there. We were 6-3 and there was a lot of talent. I had spent the previous year as a graduate assistant at Western Illinois after being fired as the head coach from Leaf River High School. One of the coaches at Western Illinois told me that I now understood what football coaching was all about.

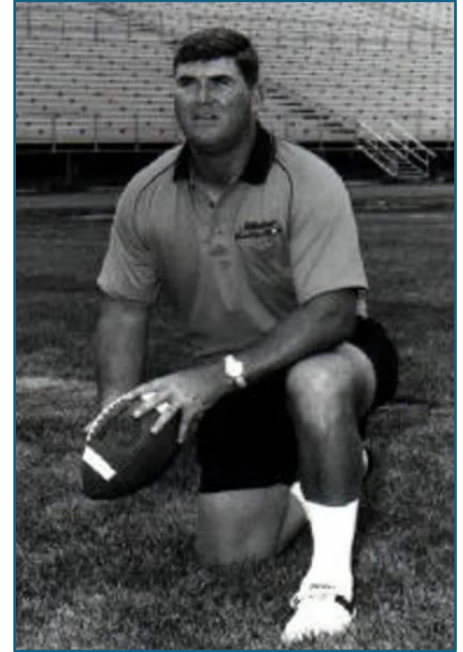
In the spring the Rock Island School District tried to pass a referendum. I volunteered to go door to door asking residents to vote for increased taxes so I could keep my job. Most of those who answered their door were retired people on fixed incomes, and trust me when I tell you they voted. The referendum failed horribly. The district laid off over two hundred teachers, most of whom were young. At the time, I was an assistant track coach working for Coach Wayne Bonsal. He had gone to Northern Iowa at the same time as Merv Habenicht. He called Coach Hab and I got an interview.

I had mixed feelings about coaching in Iowa. I had begun my teaching career at Lee Center High School in Argyle, Iowa. I coached as an assistant football coach and a six-on-six girl's assistant basketball coach. I had never even seen basketball like this! Argyle was a true learning experience. In football, we ran a short punt formation offense which was new to me also. I was hired as a long-term substitute teacher and the teacher recovered so I found myself looking for work after the first semester. Welcome to Leaf River where I was their original second choice.

I meet Randy Scott and Tom Downs for the first time at a sporting goods store in Moline. We were there to pick up our coaching shorts and shoes. Randy had just graduated from Northern Iowa and Tom was from the University of Wisconsin Platteville. Tom had spent his time in the army. After moving for the first four years of my career I was looking for a home. I found it in Bettendorf. The first two years were tough but the players fought hard. Back in the early days, Clinton was our biggest rivalry. We took turns making life difficult for each other. In 1979, we had a shot at making the playoffs and Clinton beat us at home. We played the games at the old high school and rode a bus down to the stadium from the new school on 18th Street.

The following year we began play at TouVelle Stadium. That marked the beginning of the legacy years for the Bulldogs. After Merv's passing the field was named in his honor. The first year, there we won every season game. We made it to the championship but lost. The next year we had one loss but won the Class 4-A State Championship.

It soon became the expected result of the Bulldogs.



Coach John Lavelle
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